

Rowland Evans and Robert Novak

U.S. Penny Pinching in Laotian War Is Too Fine to Stop Red Offensive

VIENTIANE, Laos — A 5,000-man increase in the hard-pressed Royal Lao army is being blocked because the war in Laos, though vital to the enormous U.S. commitment in Vietnam, is financed on a pinchpenny basis by Washington.

The 5,000 new soldiers, on top of the present 55,000-man Royal army and 40,000 irregulars, are needed to cope with the greatly escalated invading army of nearly 70,000 North Vietnamese (plus ineffective Pathet Lao Communist guerrillas, variously estimated between 20,000 and 50,000). But so great are Washington pressures to hold down spending in Laos that chances are Uncle Sam won't produce the money.

The problem is by no means limited to troops. U.S. officials, slowly losing ground against the North Vietnamese invaders, must coax and tease for weapons, aircraft, and other equipment. What's worse, with the new isolationism running high in Washington and the Senate Foreign Relations Committee's unveiling of the previously covert U.S. operation here, money available for Laos may become tighter still.

Yet, Laos is critical to the over-all fate of Indochina. As its problems mount in South Vietnam, North Vietnam has nearly four regular divisions pinned down in Laos. Without the U.S.-financed Lao resistance, Hanoi not only could transfer most of these troops to South Vietnam but also might pressure the Vientiane government into demanding an end to U.S. bombing of the Ho Chi Minh trail in southern Laos.

Considering these stakes, the shoestring American budget in Laos — less than \$500 million a year — makes the operation a model in cost effectiveness. For example, the 40,000 irregulars (including Gen. Vang Pao's Meo guerrillas) are advised by fewer than 250 operatives of the Central Intelligence Agency.

More important, Laos demonstrates that the U.S. can effectively fight Communist insurgency without sending nine U.S. army divisions into battle. No conscript U.S. soldier has been



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killed in Laos. The Americans taking the risk here are Army and CIA professionals.

But Washington may be drawing the pinchpenny concept too fine to stop the Communist offensive in northern Laos. Lao forces are outgunned as well as outnumbered. In a pleading tone, political figures and generals from Prime Minister Souvanna Phouma on down stressed to us the desperate need for better arms.

Only 21,000 M-16 rifles have been squeezed out of Washington, and at least 10,000 more are essential right now. For budgetary reasons, Washington has flatly refused to supply the potent M-60 machine-gun. The contrast with profligate U.S. military spending in Vietnam is stunning.

ALL THAT HAS really kept the Lao army in the fight has been airpower, especially bombing strikes flown by Americans. But this too is a hand-me-down affair. Requests from U.S. officials here for bombing runs are handled by Gen. Creighton Abrams in Saigon, who naturally gives the Vietnam war priority. Accordingly, when a recent Communist truck convoy was spotted heading toward Vang Pao's embattled base at Long Tieng and an air strike was requested, no planes were made available. The chance was lost. It was not the first such lost opportunity.

Actually, there are incipient signs of self-sufficiency by the Lao army. A North

Vietnamese assault on Pak-sane last week was repelled by Lao troops and Lao aircraft (dispatched from Vientiane) without a single American adviser in the act. Nobody is calling the Lao soldier a tiger, but there has been improvement. Lao troops—at least those with an M-16—no longer run at the sound of Vietnamese footsteps.

Far into the future, however, U.S. aid will be essential. If it ends, the North Vietnamese would need barely four months to liquidate the war in Laos. Even the present level of U.S. aid may be inadequate to prevent disaster.

The only recent relaxation in this pressure was a move by some North Vietnamese regulars from southern Laos into Cambodia, again demonstrating that this is one large Indochinese war.

Just how clearly the Nixon administration envisions Vietnam, Cambodia and Laos as part of the same war will determine the ultimate outcome here. Having unsuccessfully attempted a covert operation in Laos, Washington now confronts the need for greater spending here just as political pressures at home are running in the opposite direction.

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